Life

April 5, 1987, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Scripture
John 11 (selected verses)

"I am the resurrection and the life."
-John 11:25a (RSV)

"I am the resurrection and the life...whoever believes in me will never die." Jesus said that, and it may be the boldest claim ever made, and the highest hope...

When someone asked Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, if he ever thought about life after death he responded, "Who hasn't?" But then Buber went on to say that "after" is the wrong word. The Bible is interested in "life before death," as well as life after death...which is where the issue is for most of us.

My proposal this morning is that we live in the tension between life and death, that to be human is to know about death, and to the extent that we know about it, to live under its power. My proposal is that God is on the side of life: that in Jesus Christ, God has invited us to live life in spite of death, accept life, love life - to have eternal life. My proposal is that, in regard to this issue there is a decision to be made by each of us, the most important decision we will ever make. My further proposal is that we make that decision many times without even knowing it.

My proposal comes from a story in the 11th chapter of John. It is a story about the power of death and the power of life, which turns out to be the power of love... As a matter of fact, that is the subject of the entire Fourth Gospel.

Near the beginning a man comes to see Jesus under the cover of darkness. Jesus tells him that in order to live he must be born again. "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked. "What does this mean?"

The Fourth Gospel answers by way of a wonderful sequence of vignettes to illustrate what it means to be alive - In Christ: a crippled man walking: an outcast woman accepted: a blind man seeing - each a brilliant work of art, full of subtlety and nuance, but with some details so vivid you can almost feel the touch of a hand and see the brightness of a light in the darkness.

This story is the last in the amazing sequence. It is the summation. It is a dramatic illustration of God's power of life. It is also the cause for Jesus' crucifixion. After what transpires this day Jesus is a dead man. Please come into the presence of this story with great respect. It is perhaps the most difficult story in the Bible for us. It is meant to be. It is about the most important issue of all. So come into the presence of this story with the same quiet respectfulness with which you might stand before a work of great art - or with which you might sit as the organist plays the Toccata & Fugue in D Minor. Come into the presence of this strange and piercing story and listen for what it says to you.

Martha, Mary and Lazarus, sisters and brother, lived at Bethany, two miles outside Jerusalem. They were close friends of Jesus. He was in their home frequently. He would use their house as a base during the last week of his life.

A message came to Jesus. "Your friend is dying." Why Jesus then waited two days is not clear. When your best friend is dying, you drop what you're doing and go. By the time Jesus approaches Bethany, Lazarus has been dead four days. That, according to Rabbinical teaching means really dead.

When Martha hears that he is on the way she goes out to meet him. In fact, Martha challenges him. "This needn't have happened had you come earlier." And it is in conversation with Martha that Jesus says words which tell us what this incident is about. "I am the resurrection and the life... Whoever believes in me will never die."

Martha leaves and Mary replaces her and the same conversation takes place. Then, approaching the place of burial, Jesus begins to feel "deeply moved in spirit and troubled," the text reads, moved either by his friends' grief, or by his own profound response to the death of his friend Lazarus. The intensity is building now. An alternate translation of what Jesus was feeling is "profound anger."

The crowd, which is a kind of Greek chorus in the background, wonders why a man who goes around making blind men see, can't deal with a sick friend. And then the author, with a straight face, tells us that Jesus said, "Remove the stone from the cave where he is buried." Martha, the one we have learned you can count on to worry about the pot roast while everyone else is talking about religion, makes a delicate but relevant observation. "Remove that stone and there will be an odor." Jesus prays, and then the author uses another unusually strong word: "he shouted, 'Lazarus, come out.'" Jesus instructs those with enough fortitude still to be around - and it surely wasn't many - to unbind Lazarus. Lazarus is never heard from again. The immediate result of this incident is the determined, collaborative effort by the authorities to eliminate Jesus.

For the past decade, it seems that someone is always dying and coming back to life, and then telling their experience to a writer who puts it all in a sensational book. On the day I prepared this sermon the Today Show reported a breakthrough in the science of extending human life by freezing. Apparently a scientist put his dog on ice for a day or so and the dog seemed none the worse for wear. So what we modern folk have to decide

first about this story is on what level to listen to it. Is it science? Is it history? Is it psychology? It is my profound hope that when you decide the level at which you will listen, that you actually listen for the Word of God in this story. Because whether or not it happened like it says it happened is not, in this instance, the issue or even the most important question to ask. The issue is what God is saying to us in this disturbing and penetrating story.

As I struggled with this passage this week and contended with it and argued back at it, I rediscovered a wonderful little fact that put it all in perspective. Archeologists have discovered a first century tomb about where the town of Bethany was and there are three names carved on a rock in that tomb and those names read Martha, Mary, Lazarus. Somehow when I read that - the hair raised on the back of my neck, not at the mysterious supernaturalism of the story, but at the magnificent fact that those people actually lived! It rooted this fantastic, mind-boggling story in a reality with which I can cope. I'll never know what actually happened on that hot afternoon with the sun blazing down so mercilessly that you had to shade your eyes to see anything, with small groups of people nervously following behind Jesus as he strode up to the tomb... fascinated yet terrified that he might actually do what he was surely going to do; almost perceptibly backing away, or looking so intensely that their focusing mechanisms went hay-wire as he shouted into that gaping hole in the side of the hill to his dear dead friend. What I can know is that they were flesh and blood people that afternoon who lived in time and space. What I know is that something happened that day so utterly unlikely, so incredible, that when they told about it later, there were no more appropriate words than resurrection and new life, and that whatever it was that actually happened, they had never been more sure than they were that afternoon that he was God's Christ and that in him there was such a newness of life, and an abundance of life, that living without him now appeared to be a lot like death. What I am sure of is that whatever it was that happened that day, Lazarus learned what being alive means, that he loved his life as he never had and valued it, and lived it fully and that when he eventually died, he did so with a confident courage because he knew the power of love had conquered the power of death.

It is still two weeks before Easter and we have a crucifixion to mark, but what this story knows, and what the Christian religion suggests, is that resurrection is not just an event that happened one time to Jesus, it is an experience available to people in the midst of this business of living. It has been proposed that death is far more than an event which will happen for each of us at the end of the day. Rather death becomes a power in whose reality all of life is lived and which expresses its power in the form of a lot of small, daily deaths which keep us from living.

Death is whatever keeps you from living fully. It may be the fear of your own death which has paralyzed you. It may be huge outside forces which oppress you and inhibit you and keep you bound in grave cloths. In South Africa, Christian people who read this story conclude that the power of death is a political structure that denies the full humanity of the vast majority of its citizens and is therefore deadly to them. And to those people this story of Jesus shouting to Lazarus, bound, enslaved, to get up and walk, to live, sounds striking and sometimes revolutionary.

The power of death is whatever is keeping you from living. The late William Stringfellow used to teach that it is the image of ourselves to which we bow and for which we will do anything and which we allow to determine everything about us from our choice of scotch, to the car we drive, the schools our child attends and the magazines we read. Paul Tournier says the power of death is the guilt under whose authority most of us live. Who doesn't know something about that? Dag Hammarskjold said the power of death is the cynicism and skepticism which the modern age teaches. "God doesn't die on the day we are no longer capable of wonder," he wrote in his diary, "but we do."

And so if you listen to this story with respect, God's word to you is going to be an invitation to identify the powers in your own life which keep you from living fully and which are, therefore, the power of death. It is not a comfortable invitation: the sun may be blazing hot and you may have to squint away the tears and you may be both as fascinated and horrified and afraid as those onlookers were on that day long ago. But the invitation is to identify and name the forces which keep you from being free and human and loving.

What could it be? Upper middle class, fast-track Americans spend a lot of energy, after all, pretending that we are fairly indestructible, in control of our destinies, infallible, immortal, so it may not come easy to name what keeps us from life.

It may be poor health - sickness, or a debilitating condition, or a handicap, or a worsening situation - in whose power you live daily and whose reality is an hourly reminder of your frailty... and maybe life has become nothing more than a constant coping.

It may be a boring job which has become deadly and under whose authority you have been reduced in spirit and strength.

It may be a bad marriage, a relationship that has sagged and floundered and whose deadliness has long ago convinced you that there is no hope and therefore no reason to go on investing or even trying to love.

It may be guilt, from what you have done which was less human than you know yourself to be, or a betrayal of those you most deeply love and for whom you know yourself to be capable of dying.

What this story proposes is that we identify, in order to leave behind, the forces which keep us from living and which are for us, the power of death.

This strange and wonderful story declares in very vivid images that God is passionately committed to life. When Jesus confronted the reality of his friend's death he was deeply moved - or - he was deeply angry. I like that.

If you have confronted the reality of death, you know that among other feelings it calls out of you is anger. Counselors know that part of the important grief process is anger: anger at doctors, anger at funeral

directors, anger at clergy or anyone else in the vicinity because beneath it all is the primal anger, at God - at the basic insulting unfairness of death. In a recent interview Bette Davis described her stroke as an "ultimate insult" and then expressed considerable anger at everyone... doctors, nurses, friends; it was a primal anger. I love the possibility that Jesus was angry because his dear friend was cut off in the fullness of life. I love knowing that the power of God is angry and offended with death.

God loves life. God loves it when people live life fully. And so one of the best kept secrets is that to be a Christian - to follow Jesus Christ is not to cut back your living, to pull in your horizons and lower your sites but to live life deeply by loving it profoundly...precisely because in Jesus Christ God has loved it. To love it precisely because Jesus Christ died loving it.

The invitation is to identify the power of death in the middle of your life: to start "discarding your own grave cloths" is the way someone put it. And it is an invitation to live as you have never lived before - by celebrating, appreciating and loving your own life.

The word here - shouted to each of us to get our attention is to start living again by loving.

Loving life with great, uncompromising passion, loving your own life as God's personal gift to you.

Loving those dear people God has given you as precious gifts, loving acquaintances and strangers, people you know and people you don't know.

Loving the whole wonderful world which on some mornings needs a few more people who know how to embrace it and hold it close - by embracing each other and holding each other close.

My proposal to you this morning began with the suggestion that we live in this tension between the power of life and the power of death. My proposal concludes with the suggestion that in Jesus Christ God has shown the power of his love to raise up men and women to new life.

The Good News of this Gospel is no less staggering than the story of Lazarus. Jesus said: "I am the resurrection and the life...whoever believes in me will never die."

The invitation is to trust that: to believe in Jesus Christ: to live in his love, forever. Amen.

Praise be to you, O God, for light in the darkness.
Praise be to you for love which lives in the middle of
hatred and apathy.
Praise be to you for reminders that you have overcome
the power of death, and that in your love, we are
safe forever.
Praise and adoration and glory and power to you great God,
and to Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.